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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how master's degree students in a principal preparation program facilitated action research with teachers to promote school improvement. The study identified effective strategies used with teachers during classroom action research, noting instructional strategies future principals considered most effective during the learning process of action research and processes university faculty used to determine preferred practice. Eight future principals conducted action research projects on improving classroom educational processes. Informal interviews with master's degree students and faculty examined their perceptions of the action research process. The researcher analyzed the action research reports, which provided data on design methodology, data analysis, formulation of an action plan, and the graduate student's interaction with the teacher, who was involved in the action research process. The researcher also acted as a participant observer. The paper discusses the longitudinal process used to accomplish the action research and describes how the dialogic process between students and faculty provided critical feedback. Results revealed that the model engaged teachers in critical and reflective thinking. One outcome of the research was the development of an alternative form of action research, reflective conversation. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Preparing Principals for School Improvement:

An Action Research Model

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of collaborative research conducted during an interactive process between faculty and students. Master's degree students conducted one-on-one action research with a teacher to create improvements in the classroom instructional process and curriculum. The action research was a pilot program of the field-based master's degree curriculum. The paper discusses the longitudinal process used to accomplish the action research and how a dialogic process among students and faculty provided critical feedback. Results revealed that the model engaged teachers to look critically and reflectively. Development of an alternative form of action research, reflective conversation, was an outcome of the research.

Preparing Principals for School Improvement: An Action Research Model

Leaders of schools require the skills to work collaboratively with teachers to facilitate the school improvement process.Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) stated that school improvement requires two-order change. "First-order change leaves the basic organizational features of the school undisturbed" (Polite, 1995, p. 3). Classroom instructional procedures and curriculum are considered first-order change. Establishing a shared vision, creating productive work cultures, and developing leadership capacity are integral aspects of second-order change (Leithwood et al.). Change in context occurs when people develop a shared commitment. People establish shared commitment and aspirations when they discuss the 'undiscussable" (p. 9) subjects, become reflective, and practice an inquiry process (Senge, et al., 1999).

An inquiry process that causes teachers, administrators, and other staff to look critically at their processes and procedures facilitate school improvement. Inquiry that affects this process was defined by Mills (2000) as action research. "**Action research** [bold in text] is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment, to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn" (p. 6).

This paper discusses how students, who were enrolled in a principal preparation master degree program, facilitated action research with teachers to facilitate school improvement in the classroom. The Wichita State University Master's degree in educational leadership is a two-year cohort course of study. The program is field based with an inquiry focus.

Program participants are members of field study teams. Each field study team consists of eight students and a faculty member. Team-based field research is conducted from August to February. Each student, subsequent to completion of the team field research, conducts action research in his or her school. Students on the authors' team, as part of a pilot program, facilitated action research with a classroom teacher.

The author conducted collaborative research to identify effective strategies for principals to use with teachers during classroom action research. Identified processes enabled university faculty to establish strategies to facilitate future learning. To accomplish the purpose the research answered three research questions:

1. What strategies could principals accomplish to facilitate successful action research with staff, individually and collectively?
2. What instructional strategies did future principals believe to be most effective during the learning process of action research?
3. What processes did university faculty use to determine preferred practice?

Theoretical Base

Improvement in the classroom should be data based with the purpose to increase student learning. "Data are to goals what signposts are to travelers" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 36). Improvement, based of goal achievement, should close the gap between preferred practices and what is actually occurring in the classroom.

How do teachers assess, evaluate, and make decisions about instructional improvement? Teachers, perhaps with collaboration of others, should adopt a

cyclical process that allows for problem identification, collection of applicable data, analysis of these data, and development of an action plan. This process was identified by Stringer (1996) and McKay (1992) as action research.

Action research involves persons, who will be affected by the outcomes, as researchers. Stringer (1996) identified three processes inherent in action research. The processes:

1. are empirical and reflective (or interpretive);
2. engage people who have traditionally been called "subjects" as active participants in the research process; and
3. result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants. (p. xvi).

Relating these three processes to a classroom setting allows us to define research procedures that will lead to improved instruction, and hopefully improved student achievement. Empirical is defined as "relying on experience or observation alone often without due regard for system or theory" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, p. 408). The same text defines reflective as "thoughtful deliberation" (p. 989). Teachers frequently engage in a thoughtful process about their teaching experiences. Foshay (1998) claimed that many teachers engage in a highly informal deliberate thought process about their teaching. In essence, many teachers conduct a form of action research to assess the success of their instruction. Formalizing this practice into a collaborative process with others provides for enhanced depth of study and results.

The second process asks individuals who normally provide data to be involved in the collection and analysis process. Data analysis becomes worthy when those, who are charged with the responsibility of implementation,

determine meaning (Stringer, 1996). Lack of ownership can cause initiatives to fail. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross Roth, and Smith (1999) claimed that most change initiatives fail.

Initiatives fail because those involved in implementation are not part of the change process. Joyce (1999) claimed that change is a top-down-bottom-up process. The process requires individuals, who are affected, to work parallel with leaders to create lasting change. Knowledge allows individuals to be informed and to make effective decisions about change. The five disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking provide a process to acquire foundational knowledge to be partners in the change process (Senge, Cambron-McCabe. Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000)

Outcomes of the research should be relevant to the participants. Teachers participate in reflective dialogue with colleagues to determine an action plan. Sagor (1992) termed this process as analytical discourse. The dialogic process contributes to the school becoming a learning organization (Senge, et al., 2000). An effective dialogic process will result in change to the context. Lebow and Simon (1997) claimed that real change occurs in context not people.

Action research empowers teachers to be an integral part of the school improvement process. The results, compared to expended time, should be worthy. It gives teachers control to change their instruction. Principals, who work collaboratively with teachers to conduct action research, model the attributes for developing leadership capacity. "The best leader is the best server. And if you're a servant, by definition you're not controlling" (Kelleher, 1999, p. 44).

Methodology

Collaborative research was conducted during an interactive process between a faculty member, the researcher, and students. The researcher used the qualitative paradigm to allow data to be collected in the context and be seen through the eyes of the respondents. Qualitative research provides the researcher with data to produce a contextually rich, thick description (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Thick description and the contextual data provide a base knowledge for the reader to assess applicability of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reader constructs meaning of the research and resolves applicability to her context.

The interactive process provided an opportunity for the researcher and respondent to participant in an informal interview process. The interview process provides opportunities for the "researcher and respondent to travel back and forth in time; to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (Erlandson, et al., 1993, p. 85). Interview format may range from a structured to an unstructured form of data collection (Patton, 1990). The researcher conducted unstructured interviews, conversation with a purpose, to collect data. Erlandson, et al. termed conversation with a purpose as an informal interview. Interviews were conducted with master's degree students and faculty. Student interviews provided data concerning their perceptions of the action research process.

The researcher analyzed the action research reports. Analysis of the reports provided data about design methodology, data analysis, formulation of an action plan, and the graduate student's interaction with the teacher, who was

involved in the action research process. Documents provide low cost data that accurately depict the situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher acted as a participant observer. Spradley (1980) claimed social settings are the environment for participant observations. "Any physical setting can become the basis for a social situation as long as it has people present and engaged in activities" (Spradley, p. 40). The researcher was a participant observer of the dialogue among students and between students and faculty concerning the planning phases of the action research. Other students and faculty acted as resources during the conceptualization and planning phase of peer action research.

Data from interviews, documents review, and observations were triangulated to identify categories, themes, and findings. Different respondents, methodologies, and investigators provide sources for triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation allows the researcher to establish credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Findings, supported with literature review, resulted in conclusions and an action plan for changing the curriculum of the principal preparation program.

Results

Eight students each conducted three action research projects. The purpose of the research was to improve an educational process associate with the classroom. The various action research projects included the data collection methods of observations, interviews, focus groups, documents review, and questionnaires. Each research was limited to one or two data collection methods. Simplicity of process was a focus to enable teacher involvement.

Instructional Process

Program curriculum required principal preparation students to conduct a school wide action research. During the spring semester of 2001, the eight students, who worked on a team with the author, were given the option of conducting classroom action research. All eight of the students chose to conduct three action research projects instead of the school wide research. The action research could be conducted one-on-one with a teacher or with a small group of teachers concerning a common issue.

Students and faculty participated in a dialogic conversation to collaboratively define a process that would support three outcomes. The first outcome was the conduct of meaningful research that would create change in the classroom. The second outcome was to develop a learning process that established knowledge to ensure successful action research. The third outcome was to use the new knowledge and expertise to create skills that would allow replication of action research as a routine aspect of theirprincipalship.

The students' inquiry experience from field research and action research provided a strong knowledge base and skills for working one-on-one to conduct action research. In addition to those skills, students discussed strategies for approaching a teacher. Main topics to enforce while talking with the teacher was to ensure that the teacher understood (a) the action research was voluntary, (b) he or she chose the topic, (c) the process was not evaluative, (d) the sole purpose was for improvement, and (e) the data belonged to him or her. The students emphasized they would accept the role of a servant leader during the action research. Students reported that every teacher who was contacted accepted to participate in action research.

The students worked as a team throughout the action research process. During the process each student discussed the research problem, purpose, design, data, analysis, and action plan. Other students and faculty member asked questions and provided critical feedback. At completion of each research, the students presented the results, their reflection on the process, and the comments or reflections of the participating teacher.

The students submitted, to the faculty member, their action research. Report submission was electronic or hard copy. Analysis of the eight reports was provided to the students without reference to report or person. The single report allowed team learning.

The learning process was continuous and reflective. Students learned from their experience, as well as the experience of others. The new knowledge was incorporated into the subsequent study. Many students commented about the knowledge and ideas gleaned from others. The climate was positive and focused on improvement.

The instructional process included principal preparation student individual and team reflections. The reflective process provided an opportunity for the students to make sense of the action research and the process that they used to work with teachers. Team reflections afforded a process to share experiences and develop shared meaning. High-level of trust among the team allowed for an open dialogue. Students shared negative experiences and asked for strategies that others might use in a similar situation.

The principal preparation students all believed that the action research helped teachers improve their instruction. Reflections revealed that several teachers had informed the principal preparation student that they would

continue to use action research. After one teacher conducted action research, he shared the model with two other teachers, who stated that they were going to conduct their action research. The reflection after each action research provided a critique for the principal preparation students to improve their process.

Development of the Process

The principal preparation students used two designs to accomplish their action research. The design used most frequently was a quantitative or qualitative research design, which used data collection methods of surveys, interviews, focus groups, documents review, and observations. The principal preparation student and teacher determined the data to be collected, analyzed the data set, and developed an action plan. The person implementing the action was involved with each process.

The second design was a reflective conversation between the principal preparation student and teacher. This design was discovered during the debriefing process of an action research. One student used this process in lieu of collecting data. The principal preparation student observed the same class on two occasions. The principal preparation student believed that it would have been inappropriate to collect data from the high school students. The principal preparation student and teacher collaboratively decided to enter into a reflective conversation about the studied issue. The results of this action research provided meaningful results that led to the development of an effective action plan. Presentation of the design and results created interest among other students and faculty.

Following the debriefing the other students and faculty member conducted an analytic discourse with principal preparation student who used the

reflective conversation. The questioning created an in-depth understanding of the process and a shared meaning of the concept. Several students asked if they could explore the reflective conversation and use it if appropriate. The consensus was that the process could be used, providing the purpose and problem were defined.

Action Research

One action research, conducted in a high school setting, explored students' perceptions of sensitive issues discussed during health class. This research was pertinent because a faculty member of this school had been murdered earlier in the school year. A survey revealed the 10 most sensitive topics perceived by the students. Several of those topics were not on the teacher's top 10 list.

Class discussion facilitated by the teacher and principal preparation student resulted in the high school students offering several suggestions for presenting sensitive topics. The suggestions included skills that the teacher should possess and strategies that the teacher could use to make the topics less sensitive.

Reflection of the process by the principal preparation student revealed value of the research. Prior to the research the teacher stated that she did not have specific strategies for presenting sensitive issues. As a result of the research and action plan the teacher informed the principal preparation student that she was better prepared to teach sensitive issues. One student stated to the principal preparation student that we are answering the survey questions "because Mrs. Robbins (pseudonym) cares about us."

Another action research involved students at a large inner-city high school. The purpose of the research was to identify high school student

perceptions about diversity issues in their school. Teachers were unaware of several of the issues identified by the students. Male and female members of minority ethnicities revealed how teachers stereotype them and how those stereotypes were portrayed during class. A second interesting finding was that students to do not "hangout by ethnicity, but by neighborhood." The action plan, developed by the teachers and principal preparation student, with the high school students' input, identified strategies teachers could use to be more sensitive to diversity. Professional development on diversity was an element of the action plan.

A third action research, conducted in an elementary setting, examined different instructional strategies for teaching social studies. The students responded to a five-question survey, which was designed to identify the most effective instructional strategies for learning social studies. Some elements identified from the survey included research of battles, small group discussions, and projects. Results of the survey were triangulated with data from assessment of student outcomes. The principal preparation student and teacher developed an action plan. Elements of the plan included immediate actions and actions that would be implemented during the next year.

Principal preparation student reflections revealed that she and the teacher believed the research as valuable. "The time we spent analyzing the student data as beneficial as valuable dialogue took place between the teacher and I." Time expended by the teacher was minimal, three planning periods.

A fourth action research involved a sensitive issue among the language arts teachers at a middle school. The language arts teachers used two different

strategies for teaching reading. The teachers wanted to identify strategies that best facilitated student learning.

Student surveys and teacher interviews were used to collect data. Two hundred and eighty-eight students completed a six-question survey. Four of the questions were open-ended and two were forced response.

Students identified strategies that used parts of both strategies. Teacher interviews revealed some common elements from both strategies. The principal preparation student and teacher developed an action plan that encompassed common strategies. The plan was presented to the language arts teachers for modification, if necessary, and implementation.

The principal preparation student and teacher reflected on the process. The principal preparation student stated that she expected the teachers "to cringe" when she asked them to participate in action research. The reflection continued that the teachers were receptive of the process. Teacher reflection stated, "I would use this process again, becasue I feel in the long run it will be beneficial to all involved."

Another action research used reflective conversation as a design. Reflective conversation between the principal preparation student and teacher resulted in the teacher solving a problem that she thought had escalated beyond her control. A problem with a high school student caused a strained relationship between the teacher and that student. Statements by both individuals made it difficult for the two persons to have a constructive, problem solving conversation.

The principal preparation student posed thought provoking questions to the teacher. The responses were scripted for subsequent analysis. Some of the questions were:

- What have you done to solve the problem?
- What else could you do to solve the problem?
- What are you willing to do in this situation?
- Is there anything that you would like me to do? This question was a risk because it gave the teacher an opportunity to place the responsibility for the solution on the principal preparation student.

The teacher originally chose to let the principal preparation student solve the problem. The next day, when the reflective conversation continued, the teacher stated that she had reconciled the problem with the student. She further stated that the questions caused her to reflect, examine her beliefs, and explore other alternatives.

The process, although simple and seems intuitive, goes beyond that mindset when the responses are scripted and analyzed. The opportunity for the respondent to review her answers during a quiet time enhanced reflection and ability to problem solve. The principal preparation student believed that allowing the teacher to talk with an unbiased person and take responsibility resulted in appropriate corrective actions.

What We Learned

Inquiry experience, preferably field research, enables principal preparation students to successfully facilitate action research with a teacher. Skills, gained during field inquiry experience, give the principal preparation student confidence and command of procedures necessary to facilitate the action research process.

Peer support from team members provides opportunities for critical feedback. The critique occurs through a dialogic process that includes thought

provoking questions. The questioning process causes the researcher to examine her process as well as provide opportunities for other team members to examine their process. Sharing of ideas and reflection, individually and collectively, enhances the action research. Trust among team members encourages individuals to openly discuss problems and concerns.

Teachers, with the assistance of a principal preparation student, use action research as a school improvement tool. Element that encourage teachers to become partners in action research are simplicity and minimal time. Results have to be worthy of expended time and effort.

Action research uses a variety of methodologies and designs. The methodologies and research design is a collaborative decision that allows the inquiry process to meet the needs of the teacher. Principal preparation students stated that the teacher shared in the decision of what data should be collected and from whom it should be collected.

Reflective conversation was an alternative model of action research. This model of action research allows a teacher to interact with an unbiased person to explore alternative solutions to a problem. The model, which is simple, requires a high-level of trust between the researcher and teacher.

The action research, when conducted in partnership with a teacher, can produces improved classroom practices. The process can, and should be, simple. Many teachers enter into a reflective process. They, however, seldom document their reflection or develop an action plan. These two actions facilitate lasting change.

The action research included Stringer's (1996) three principals of reflection, participation, and pertinent results. The three program outcomes to

conduct meaningful research, to acquire knowledge to conduct that research, and to develop skills to facilitate future action research were accomplished by the principal preparation students.

Application

Action research is an effective tool for school improvement initiatives within the classroom. Administrators can facilitate leadership capacity among teachers through the support and empowerment of action research. Lessons learned from this collaborative research can create opportunities in the K-12 and higher education setting.

K-12 and higher education faculty should work as partners to facilitate action research in the classroom. Principal preparation programs and master's degree program for teachers could include an action research component. The component should teach action research as a practical school improvement tool.

Teachers and administrators, who are versed in the action research process, can act as teachers of teachers. A support network should be developed to assist faculty and administrators learning the process. The support system should encourage dialogue and critical feedback.

Action research, conducted in the classroom, should be a simple process. We must remember the intent of this action research model is to identify and solve classroom issues. Solving the greater problems of schools and education can be left for others at another time.

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